

Mahābhārata Now
Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics

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Of Sleep and Violence

Reading the Sauptikaparvan in Times of Terror

Anirban Das

The *Sauptikaparvan* is one of the shortest chapters in the *Mahābhārata*. However, it describes one of the most violent moments in the text. A violence that, in order to be discerning, does not really belong to the great war of Kurukṣetra. A violence that is almost an appendage to the narrative of the war. Yet, in a certain sense, it is the quintessential moment of the war. An essence that comes at the end, almost after the end. Like the centre that lies beyond the structure. The centre that is definitionally outside the structure. The violence of this moment enacts, in a concentrated and focussed manner, the meaningless and senseless violence that inheres in the reasons of the war, of the social, of the life itself. We may, through a reading of this chapter in a given mode, learn some aspects of the violence that inheres in our world, our life and our reasons. It is instructive that this chapter which narrates the killing of the entire victorious army of the Pāṇḍavas is named not after the act of killing and aggression. Instead, it bears the name of the unwitting passivity of the massacred. The name points at the state of sleep when terror struck. The word *sauptika* is derived from *supti*, that is, slumber. Or is it the slumber of reason? Not the moment when reason sleeps but the sleep that reason bears, with and in.

A number of disclaimers are in order. First, to state the obvious, when we learn from the *Mahābhārata*, when reading the text we seem to hear resonances of some of our own predicaments; we do not claim that the text predicts the twenty-first century or that it reflects a society similar to our own. Keeping away from the naivety of a mirror-theory for literary depictions, I read some of my concerns into the text. Of course, the text has to be pliant and expansive enough to accommodate that. That, as anyone who has read the *Mahābhārata* in any of its redactions would perhaps agree, is the minimum one can say for the text. Thinking of terror in the twenty-first century, one can read the part of the text that names itself as related to sleep. This text describes the killing of the sleeping Pāṇḍava army at the end of the Kurukṣetra war when the enemy, that is, Kaurava prince Duryodhana, awaits death with broken thighs at the Dvaipāyana *hṛd* (lake). Like the apogee in the chain of vengeance that marks the war as well as the text, the killing of a sleeping army becomes symptomatic of the devious forms of reasoning that went into the making of the war. I will go into that later.

The *Sauptikaparvan* follows the *Salyaparvan*. The latter ends with Duryodhana's last act as the prince and the leader of the Kauravas. The last three great warriors of the Kauravas, viz., Aśvatthāmā, Kṛpācārya and Kṛtavarmā, came to meet Duryodhana, defeated (in an unfair battle with Bhīma) and waiting to die. Aśvatthāmā broke into a tirade of abuse against the Pāṇḍavas and declared that he would destroy them all. Duryodhana made him the general of the Kaurava army. This seemed a symbolic yet ineffectual move: he was made the general of a three-man army against the mighty Pāṇḍavas who had just vanquished the great Kaurava army (along with its allies) of which these three were a part.

The *Sauptikaparvan* begins with the three warriors first moving south from the battlefield and then changing direction to the east as they feared that the Pāṇḍavas might come after them. The three-men army did not show much sign of the offence it had promised Duryodhana. As Kṛpācārya and Kṛtavarmā went to sleep in the forest where they had reached and settled for the night, the angry Aśvatthāmā remained awake and alert. Then something happened which resonated with Aśvatthāmā's raging mind. It seemed to suddenly reveal the only act he could embark on at that juncture. A ghastly owl arrived and was killing its sleeping preys, the crows in their nests:

He tore the wings of some and cut off the heads of others with his sharp talons and broke the legs of many. Highly strong as he was, he killed many that fell down before his eyes (*Sauptikaparvan* 1.40–41).*

Having destroyed the victims, the owl went away satisfied. Witnessing this carnage, Aśvatthāmā reached his own conclusions. The lessons that he learnt were of a pragmatic nature. He had promised Duryodhana that he would destroy the Pāṇḍavas. The flipside of this promise was that he was not equal to them in war. He would be defeated if he fought in a fair manner. The inference, obvious for him, was to kill them when they were not ready to fight, to take them unawares. His reasoning was impeccable:

People generally, as also those well-read in the scriptures, always prefer means which are certain to those which are uncertain. Censure and bad name, whatever this act may engender, ought to be incurred by a person who leads the life of a kṣatriya. The sinful Pāṇḍavas have, at every step, perpetrated very ugly, censurable and deceitful acts (ibid.).

... The enemy's forces, even which fatigued, or wounded, or while eating, or when retiring, or when resting within their camp, should be beaten. They should be equally treated when sleeping at dead at night, or when bereft of commanders, or when routed, or when labouring under an error (*Sauptikaparvan* 1.51–52).

* All references to the *Sauptikaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* are from Velankar (1948) and English translations from Dutt (2004) and Lal (2008).

Thus, he resolved to attack and rout the Pāṇḍava forces as they slept in the camp. This was the beginning of a long line of reasoning that the Kauravas followed before they actually launched the attack.

Both Nrisinha Prasad Bhaduri (in his piece on Aśvatthāmā in his Bengali book on the biographies of *Mahābhārata's* anti-heroes, *Mahabharater Pratinayak* [2009]) and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (in his Bengali play *Uttampurush Ekbachan: Ekti Bhan* [2002] whose English translation bears the title *The Book of Night: A Moment from the Mahabharata* [2008]) bring out the intricate texture of reasoning that went into the making of this decision. This was not a spontaneous gesture made at the spur of the moment. A tortuous line of logical argument ensued with Kṛpācārya, Aśvatthāmā's maternal uncle and another of the three warriors. Kṛpa tried to dissuade Aśvatthāmā in a number of ways. One of these was to postpone the act by referring to the need to discuss with friends and elders the following morning. He even spoke of his own inability to think clearly due to the sorrows inflicted by the war. On a more general register, he spoke of the role of *daiva* and *puruṣakāra* (translated by M. N. Dutt as 'destiny' and 'manliness' respectively, the latter translated by P. Lal as 'effort') in one's actions. He spoke of Duryodhana's wrong-headed actions leading to disastrous results for them all. And he promised fighting the Pāṇḍavas in the morning along with Aśvatthāmā. But Aśvatthāmā persisted in his decision to attack the Pāṇḍava camp unawares that very night. His was an argument that combined reason and emotion. He spoke of his own inability to rest till he avenged the wrongs perpetrated by the Pāṇḍavas. He reasoned on the basis of his own inability to defeat the enemy in fair battle. Thus, unfair attack emerged as the only possible consequence of the reasons of emotion.

Aśvatthāmā's emotions had distinct traces of a Nietzschean *ressentiment*. This aspect is forcefully brought out in Bandyopadhyay's play (2002); in the short and insightful 'Afterword' by Bandyopadhyay for the English translation of the play (2008); and in the 'Afterword' for an anthology of his essays titled 'A Return to Now' (2012a). Like the Nietzschean notion, Aśvatthāmā's emotions and actions have that nature of being pitted tooth and nail against the dominant and yet structured by the very rules of that dominant. The sign of that structuring is in the ontologizing of terror as the transcendental answer to the pragmatic moves of Kṛṣṇa, the archenemy of the Kauravas. As Bhaduri's biographical reconstruction brings out, Aśvatthāmā's moralizing moves only go on to show his own moral depravity. Yet, depravity may be vaunted, in the Nietzschean vein, as the only possible weapon of the defeated. That weapon, as *The Book of Night* underlines, works in reverse yet in accordance to the law of the dominant. But let us not anticipate our arguments.

Anatomy of an Argument

Ultimately, whether through the force of his arguments or through that of his convictions, Aśvatthāmā succeeds in making Kṛpa and Kṛtavarmā participants in his plan. They set out to fulfil the nefarious task of killing the sleeping Pāṇḍavas.

In 'Terror: a Speech After 9–11', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak begins with the comment: 'War is a cruel caricature of what in us can respond' (2004: 81). A caricature of response is not a true response. It mimics response. It does not respond itself. To be more exact, it responds in a way that is not a response. Ways of responding to the other's moves or the other's words include anger, shame and disgust. But for that, one has to understand and respect the other as other, as that which is not the self, that which is not derivable from, nor a reflection of the self. War caricatures these responses when it destroys the other, kills the other. It is not awake, not aware of the possibility of the other's response. Non-response can occur in multiple ways. Not always does it take the form of direct negation.

One may argue that war is mimicry in yet another sense.¹ A fair war is never originary. The origin of war lies *elsewhere*, in an earlier violence. War is posited as a response to this prior act. The legitimacy of the 'just' war is in its act of responding, in not being the source of the 'first' violence. This claim, I would suggest, is itself the founding gesture of war's violence. That it is only a response, that it follows an originary act of past aggression in a bid to institute justice, is the reason that authenticates war. War has to posit its own past, produce a temporality of reactions, to legitimate its presence. The *Mahābhārata*, in its very structure of circulations of escalating revenge, weaves this teleological ontology of war.

From Spivak's piece, we learn of two aspects of terror. Terror that slides into something called terrorism as a social movement, acts as an antonym for peace as well as for declared war. Terrorism is not full-blown frontal war. From the viewpoint of the dominant state (the US in the world, the government in the nation-state), terrorism is the irrational, unseen response to the 'legitimate' reasons of the state. One does not know terrorism. It acts without being known. It acts nonetheless. For Spivak, "terror" is the name loosely assigned to the flip side of social movements — extra-state collective action — when such movements use physical violence' (ibid.: 91).

Spivak is also aware of terror as the name of an affect (the second aspect). Going beyond the governmental move to coalesce the affect and the movement to assert victory in anti-terroristic steps, she speaks of the logical dynamic in which terror is branded mindless. The mindless slumber of terror is analogous to the Kantian sublime, Spivak seems to argue. Strictly speaking, and for the spectator, the Kantian sublime is mindless and stupid. For the sublime, by definition, exceeds intelligibility.

It names a structure: the thing is too big for me to grasp; I am scared; reason kicks in by the mind's immune system and shows me, by implication, that the big thing

¹ Arindam Chakrabarti, in personal communication, pointed at the possibility of such a reading.

is mindless, "stupid" in the sense in which a stone is stupid, or the body is . . . I call the big mindless thing "sublime" (ibid.: 94).

She calls terror an 'affect beyond affect'. To reduce Spivak's argument to the bare skeleton of formulae, and to read something of my own into her text, I see here the possibilities of a certain formulation. To reach towards the 'affect beyond affect', one does not try to understand. This is what she calls the 'eruption of the ethical'. This eruption is, for her, 'an interruption of the epistemological, which is the attempt to construct the other as object of knowledge' (ibid.: 83). Terror is not an object of knowledge. It is beyond the structure of epistemology. As such, it can only be touched by the eruptions of the ethical. And these eruptions are only imaginable through a training in 'uncoercive reorganization of desires' that, for Spivak, is the task of a humanities classroom worth its name. Not that this is sufficient. Teaching humanities is not the solution for problems in world politics. Only, in the space of the academia, one can hope to get a glimpse of the situation through imaginations thus organized. Again, this is not a task amenable to an easy formulation. It is the responsiveness to the singularities of moments that can impossibly address such a predicament. Obviously, the notion of the ethical she is alluding to is different from a common-sense view of ethics as moral imperatives. The ethical here is an intendedness to the wholly other that inheres in one's being. Ethics here is an ontological predicament. It is an experience of the impossible in the sense of the inherent impossibility of the radical other. Attention to the singularities, singularities that are underrivable from (although inalienable at the same time from) the generality of calculable reason, can — it is not necessary that it always would — reach out to the ethical in this sense. Calculations in the social science mode have something to learn from the humanities' training of desire and imagination. Always to remember, in the latter, this is not a guarantee but a possibility.

Reading the *Sauttikaparvan* in times of contemporary terror may point at some such moments of sublimity. It can be an exercise in the hearing of the unexpected murmurs of the ethical as the terrible. As the three warriors approached the camps of the Pāṇḍavas, they encountered a dreadful apparition. The description of this figure is reminiscent of Śiva, and a little later he would actually turn out to be Śivā himself. When Aśvatthāmā hurled weapons at him, they were all devoured by this figure. All weapons, from the arrows to fiery maces, proved futile. Aśvatthāmā, then, stopped attacking him and started worshipping Śiva, his favourite god. Dreadful figures seemed to attack him. Aśvatthāmā submitted wholeheartedly, offering his life to Śiva. And then he was rewarded:

For honouring [Kṛṣṇa] and at his request I have protected the Pāñcālas and displayed various sorts of illusion.

By protecting the Pāñcālas I have honoured him. They have, however, been assailed by Time. The lease of their lives is over.

Having said so to the great Aśvatthāmā, the divine Mahādeva entered Aśvatthāmā's body after giving him an excellent and polished sword (*Sauptikaparvan* 7.62–64).

Was it Aśvatthāmā or was it Śiva himself in the body of the great warrior who started the great carnage? It started with the slaying of Dhṛṣṭadyumna. Avenging the inglorious slaughter of his father Droṇācārya by Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Aśvatthāmā killed him with his bare hands and feet. He did not use any weapon, thus humiliating the enemy even in murder. One by one, the Pāñcāla and the Pāṇḍava warriors were slain. It was a gory, cruel and absolute destruction. To the dying soldiers, Aśvatthāmā looked like a scary *rākṣasa* (demon). His body was covered with blood gushing forth from the murdered. It was dark, thousands of bodies covered up the ground, and the confused army fought among themselves.² Those who escaped Aśvatthāmā were slain by Kṛpa and Kṛtavarmā at the entrance of the camp. Finally, all — except the five Pāṇḍava brothers, Kṛṣṇa and Sātyakī who were not there at the camp — were murdered. The camp was set to fire.

The next day, the three warriors conveyed this message to Duryodhana. He died satiated in revenge. The Pāṇḍavas, on hearing the news of the massacre, were stricken with grief. For Yudhiṣṭhira, this signified the futility of it all:

I have defeated my enemies,
and am now
myself defeated.

...
The losers have won —
and the winners
have lost!

We killed brothers, friends,
fathers, sons, relatives,
well-wishers and counsellors
and grandsons —
and we thought we won.
But we have lost. (*Sauptikaparvan* 10.9–11)

...
Foolish indeed is the victor
who lives
to regret his conquest.
What kind of victory is his? (*Sauptikaparvan* 10.13).

Grief was followed by vengeance. As Bhīma went in search of Aśvatthāmā, now hiding from the consequences of his deeds, Kṛṣṇa advised Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna

² The trope of armies fighting among themselves without seeing each other recurs in the *Mahābhārata* in other occasions. A famous reference to such a situation in a 'modern' text is in 'Dover Beach': 'Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night' (Arnold 1867).

to follow him. He knew Aśvatthāmā had the deadly weapon of *brahmaśira*. About Aśvatthāmā, Kṛṣṇa had the following to say:

He is anger-obsessed.
He is wicked-*atmaned*.
He is whimsical and crafty.
He is cruel. He knows how to shoot
the Brahmaśira missile (*Sauptikaparvan* 12.40).

Seeing the angry Bhīma with Nakula as his charioteer approach him with weapons, Aśvatthāmā let go the all-powerful *brahmaśira*, asking it to destroy all Pāṇḍavas. Interestingly, the infinitely destructive *brahmaśira* was animated in a blade of *iśikā* grass. The *iśikā* also played a major destructive role of in the later part of *Mahābhārata*, in the penultimate chapter, the *Mausalaparvan*. There, it was Kṛṣṇa who animated the *iśikā* to destroy his own clan, the Yādavas. Unlike the *brahmaśira* that animated a single blade, in the *Mausalaparvan*, each blade that the Yādavas threw at each other turned into *musala* (club), a deadly weapon. Kṛṣṇa, the god-incarnate, watched ineffectually as his relatives and his friends killed each other. In *Mahabharater Katha*, Buddhadeb Bose has noted how the *Mausalaparvan* reiterates the pointlessness of the Kurukṣetra war, the banality and ineffectuality of violence turned inward. He uses the expressions *biśuddha unmattatā* or 'unalloyed madness' and *chooranta buddhilop* or 'extreme senselessness' (2010: 161). The latter term may also be translated as 'extreme loss of reasonableness'. Yet, one has to remember that this madness flowed from a reason, the loss of reason followed a certain use of reason, as in the 'original' Kurukṣetra war. The little blade of *iśikā* turning into the all-destroying *brahmaśira* may yet be another metaphor for the possible banality of mass destruction, of the menace of synchronic global death in the everyday.³ One might remember at this point that the Kurukṣetra war itself had brought in the possibility of the synchronicity of death in the sense of an interruption in the diachronic sequence of death across generations. When grandfathers and uncles had conspired together to kill the boy Abhimanyu in an unjust war, the diachronicity of death was already actively disrupted. Yet, it was still a possibility, one among many others, and not an imminent and unavoidable future. A displacement of that unavoidability would soon mark the life-cycle of yet another 'boy' of the future generation, Parikṣit. But let me not move fast in the narrative of my argument.

Arjuna, upon a quick appeal from Kṛṣṇa, did shoot his own *brahmāstra* to counter and neutralize the effects of Aśvatthāmā's weapon. Before he activated the *brahmāstra*, Arjuna did not forget to chant mantras for the well-being of his

³ For the theorization of the possibility of synchronic death — which interrupts the 'natural' diachronic order of death — following the nuclear armament of the world, see Bandyopadhyay (2009).

brothers and even of Aśvatthāmā and for paying respect to the gurus and the gods. Then, the weapon for the destruction of the Pāṇḍavas and the weapon to make it ineffective remained poised against each other.

Shot from the Gāndhīva,
flaming with *maha*-splendour,
the missile dazzled
like the all-consuming fire
of universal dissolution
at the end of a yuga.

And the weapon discharged
by Droṇa's radiant son
burst
into fearful flames
like a colossal *maṇḍala*
of fire.

And suddenly,
thunder pealed
thousands of meteors
fell from the sky,
and fear gripped
all living creatures.

Caçophony crackled
in the sky,
and lapping flames
licked the directions.
The hill-forest-and-plant-
filled earth trembled (*Sauptikaparvan* 14.7–10).

The two weapons could destroy the universe with their impact. The sages Nārada and Vyāsa positioned themselves between the weapons to prevent such a consequence. They appeared like the *pāvaka* (fire) that saved the world. But, while Arjuna could retract the weapon, Aśvatthāmā could not. Arjuna, after reminding the sages that he had used the *brahmāstra* only to save their own selves from the effects of Aśvatthāmā's *brahmaśira*, withdrew his weapon. As Aśvatthāmā pleaded his inability to take back his weapon, Vyāsa asked him to direct the weapon to the pregnant bellies of the Pāṇḍava women. However, Aśvatthāmā was to give away to the Pāṇḍavas the divine stone (*maṇi*) he wore on his forehead. That would leave him devoid of strength and defence. The *brahmaśira* struck Parikṣit, the fetus in the womb of Uttarā, Abhimanyu's widowed wife. With the sole heir of the Pāṇḍava line dead, Kṛṣṇa used his powers to rejuvenate him in the womb. So, Parikṣit both died and regained his life in the womb. He would later become the

king and rule for many years. The terror that had the possibility of exterminating the world with the whole human race thus caused the death of a foetus — though a fetus destined to be the king — and that too, momentarily. Was this death? Or was it something else — a temporary cessation of life — that, by definition, could not be the irrevocable death? Before going into the implications of the event at the end of this essay, one should look closely at the moment of terror that we just passed through.

A Pathology of the Everyday

One can distinguish between terror as an *affect* and terrorism as a *social movement*. Spivak (2004) insists on this distinction. By resisting the affect of terror, by refusing to be terrorized by the terrorist, the (normal and dominant form of) society tries to face terrorism as a social movement. But what is the structure of terror as an affect? What is terror? These very large questions, as everyone knows, are deceptive. Most of the times, they are non-questions. The answers are too general to have a specific content. Yet, sometimes, they produce interesting responses. Bandyopadhyay, in his essay 'Defining *Terror*: A Freudian Exercise' (2012b) has pursued Freud's theorization to come up with one such explanation. He defines 'terror' in the following manner:

Terror is that state of the affective state during which the subject expects a known danger threatening from within and/or without to fall suddenly from some unexpected quarter (ibid.: 441; italics in the original).

This definition tries to spell out the specificity of 'terror' in its relations with the other three 'danger situations' that Freud speaks of: *fright*, *fear* and *anxiety*. Bandyopadhyay prepares a tabular representation of classification where *fright* and *fear* are conditions produced after facing a danger-situation, unexpected and indefinable in the former, and expected and definable in the latter. *Anxiety* is the condition of expectation of danger, not after one faces the situation. Terror combines expectation with the certainty of knowledge and the certainty of danger with the uncertainty of the source. The reaction is that of a combination of preparedness and helplessness, the nature of the perpetrator being abstract yet specific.

The moment of the impending collision of the two weapons is a moment of terror. One knows that destruction is certain and imminent. However, one does not know how it will happen and at what moment. One also does not know the outcome of the clash of the two weapons for certain. Yet, at the moment of terror, does one not have an inkling of hope, hope against the certainty of devastation, hope of the world-destroying encounter resulting in the momentary death (an oxymoron) of the fetus? The unanticipatability of the moment gets translated into the hope of survival. In the text of the *Mahābhārata*, this magical moment

is ontologized, and hope gets embodied in the event. Yet, this is not unalloyed survival. It is survival shot through with death, for the economy of revenge marks this very moment of remembrance. The death of the fetus is the symptom of the wound of vengeance that haunts the body of the narrative. Parikṣit, the would-be child in the womb, would be central in the chronicling of the *Mahābhārata* story. In the repeated tellings of the tale of Kurus, Parikṣit's court plays a crucial role. Re-membering is marked by the dis-memberings that the revenge achieved.

Arindam Chakrabarti has written at length on 'the moral psychology of revenge' (2005, 2008). He closely interrogates the 'psychology of revenge', that is, the moral defence upon which that psychology is premised. He questions the idea of getting even with the one who had perpetrated the 'first injustice', of the notion of retributive justice implicit in revenge, and also the idea of 'teaching a lesson' to the aggressor. He stresses upon the fact that structurally the act of revenge can never be equal to the first act of aggression. If its effects are the same (on some imaginary scale), it seems to be less as it lacks the element of being unprovoked. If the act of revenge tries to even out this inequality by increasing its effects, the target of revenge may take this as uncalled for and go in for an increased retaliation. Thus, a spiralling of violence goes on ad infinitum. The act of revenge can never re-store the loss of the earlier act. It simply replaces one loss with another. Thus, Chakrabarti argues against the dominant form of morality in the psychology of revenge. His call is not for forgiveness and forgetting but for a positive resistance (in the sense of an act beyond the structure of the initial aggression) to violence in its remembrance. The argument, at the level of analytical philosophical tradition, is convincing. It shares with that tradition an emphasis on the secure subject as the individual who decides on the basis of moral judgment in a given condition. My point is to remember the constitution of this very subject of action through a structure of events that acts way beyond the empirical contexts of the action. The moral intentions of the subject get skewed by the traces of events that constitute the subject. The will to revenge is a mark of that displacement. As such, an awareness of the dangers of a moral psychology may very well go along with a sense of inability to not act according to it. The acts of Kṛṣṇa may be seen to reflect this inability to deviate from revenge, even when he is aware of the disasters that such an action would bring about, even when he knows about its futility and the escalation of violence it will result in, even in him who for the narrative is a god incarnate. In his essay 'A Return to Now', Sibaji Bandyopadhyay presents this predicament in a specific context:

We are left wondering: if Kṛṣṇa was forewarned, why did he not prevent the disaster? Why did he only save himself and the other six? Was he then a fatalist? Did the 'Superself' think he was powerless in the face of Fate? That even with the help of 'Superman' Arjuna he could not unsettle a cosmic plan already settled? (2012: 489).

Bandyopadhyay speaks of other possibilities and keeps the question open. I read the 'fatalism' of Kṛṣṇa as a symptom of the structural constitution of the subject. This is not to absolve the subject who takes revenge from the responsibility of his/her action, but to think of the mechanism of interpellation of that very subjectivity. The intentions of the actor are unavoidably marked by the structures of being within which s/he is inserted. The apparent paradox of being responsible for what one cannot do is a predicament that the text of the *Mahābhārata* often enacts.

The awareness of the constructed nature of the subject does not take away the need to address the intentions of the subject. Even when one is attending the mechanisms of subject formation, one has to deal with the dynamic of the subject in the register of its purposive functions. Elsewhere (Das 2010: 1–36), I have discussed this necessity of addressing the intendedness of the subject in the register of ideology along with a tracing of power mechanisms that constitute the subject. Power mechanisms can chart the field of possibilities opened up to the production of the subject. For attending the unanticipatable vagaries of the workings of the subject within that field, one has to bring in the question of ideologies, though in a particular register. This register of thinking of ideologies of the subject even when the secure subject has already been dissolved into its production mechanisms, has been inaugurated at least since Althusser's notion of interpellation. In the present context, to think of the responsibility of the one who participates in the economy of revenge — being always and already inserted into that economy (logically) prior to that participation — it is not enough to invoke the inevitable markings of revenge that constitute her/his being. Chakrabarti's attempts to interrogate the moral psychology of such action have relevance in this context. Spivak talks about the non-coercive reorganization of desires that make possible the task of imagining the terrorist. The violence of terrorism cannot be ended by 'ruthless extermination', she asserts. 'I believe that we must be able to imagine our opponent as a human being, and to understand the signification of his or her action' (Chakravorty Spivak 2004: 93).

This seemingly liberal and humanist call for 'understanding' has some import even in the awareness of the structure of *ressentiment* that marks the being of the 'human'. This 'understanding', as I understand it, is not 'knowing'. It is the imagination to reach out to the 'other'. One has to remember that imagination, here, is also a short-hand term for something not reducible to that name. Imagination is a metaphor for 'figuring': giving figure to the other who is radically different from the self. One has to figure with the tools that one wields, with the tools of the self. Yet, one has to figure the other who is not reducible to, nor derivable from, the self. This is an impossible task. Imagining the terrorist is the impossible task one has to perform if one wants to reorganize the intentions of the self beyond the constructions of revenge. The moment of terror may, not necessarily though, let one have a glimpse of an other beyond the constructions of reason. The terrorist

is outside reason. The sublimity of terror has a hint of the outside, a hint which is necessary, if not enough, for the figuration of the terrorist.

Death as a trope is constitutive of terror in more than one sense. In a general sense, death is the trope of a radical futurity underivable from the present. Death, by definition, is the experience one cannot experience, for at the moment of death, there is no experience. This is different from the experience of dying which is varied and depends on the contexts of society across time and space. Thus, death, which is the most certain aspect of one's existence, is also an instance of the unanticipatable. It shares the unanticipatability of the outside to the self. The figuration of death (not that of dying) is an impossible task. One has to encounter some 'unverifiable' generalities in order to be responsible. The nature of this responsibility is complicated. An undifferentiated ethic of responsibility for all others may consist in a non-response to each. This is the act of giving name to a relationship to many that blurs the specificity of each. The relationship to each 'other' is a singularity. In the context of violence and embodiment, the ultimate singularity of the one event, death, reflects the unanticipatability of the *event* — of any event not reducible to the predictions of a prior calculus. In another, more specific, sense, death is an inalienable aspect of terror. Death, the ultimate unknown ('the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns'), shares with terror the anxiety over the unknown. As in death, so in terror, the attempt to figure the unknown is a crucial part of negotiating with the phenomenon. Terror has in it the unanticipatable anticipation of death. The moment of the two weapons is pregnant with that suggestion. The resolution of the situation is also reminiscent of the taming of that moment into a safer ontology of momentary death of the future king, marked strongly by the dynamic of reproductive heteronormativity. The terror of imminent synchronic death is displaced onto a temporary interruption of the generational line of the Pāṇḍavas. Yet, the resolution that this event enacts is again temporary and contingent. The text of the *Mahābhārata* carries the mark of death forward into the destruction of the Yādavas. The act of Kṛṣṇa saves the moment in the *Sauptikaparvan*. It returns as the utter inability to act of that same Kṛṣṇa in the *Mausalaparvan*. The effects of the *iśikā* grass pregnant with the *brahmaśira* are nullified in the former instance. The *iśikā* grass is activated to deadly weapons in the latter. The former event keeps alive the dynasty of the Pāṇḍavas. The latter ends that of the Yādavas. The *Mahābhārata*, as a text, thus forgets nothing.⁴ Before going into the related questions of violence, remembering and the relationship to the other, we will dwell a little on the way the *brahmaśira* is deflected onto the womb of Uttarā. In a pragmatic sense, this is a comparatively intriguing and placatory resolution of a dangerous situation. The possibility of the all-encompassing violence that threatened the world has been channellized into the

⁴ Buddhadeb Bose (1974) and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (2010) have commented acutely on the repetition — with displacements characteristic of memory — of the scene of Kurukṣetra in the *Mausalaparvan*.

womb of a single woman. But what made this deflection possible? What economy of gendered (with the connotations of genre and generation) sex-differentiation organized this possibility? There is a calculation in the deflection of violence thus instituted. The fetus can be killed because it is not fully human. The fetus cannot be killed because it carries the ideological burden of reproductive heteronormativity. It has to continue generations. The fetus becomes the target; it, in its male form, can become the target of the all-destroying *brahmaśira* because it carries the burden of human generational continuity. That continuity is the metaphor for humanity in the given context. The female fetus lacks this quality. The female fetus, only because it is female, does not belong to the category 'human'. In a very different context, Derrida has spoken about the inherent anthropocentrism as male-centrism active in the structure of 'sacrifice' in the sense of a 'noncriminal putting to death' (Derrida 1991: 112). The structure of being that is premised upon sacrifice of the 'other', a structure that allows for this killing which is not the killing of the human, is built upon the exclusion of all categories which are not included in the 'human'. The 'animal' is the metaphor for all 'others' that can be so killed. One may, at this juncture, be reminded of how the abortion debate is displaced in certain areas of the global south onto questions of female feticide. In the present context, Parikṣit's death could replace the death of the world because it had the metaphoric capacity to do so. And yet, this death had to be transitory to keep the 'human' line alive. We have already discussed how the *Mahābhārata*'s text re-membered this moment in a latter event of mass destruction of the Yādavas.

Remembering is a dangerous act. It involves the task of imagining the other. This task, as Derrida has shown, takes the form of a certain cannibalism. Eating may be a metaphor to think of the relationship to the intimate other. Penelope Deutscher (1998) refers to Derrida's speech after the death of Paul de Man. Derrida talks about his friend becoming, in and through his speech, an object of the speaker's memories and speculations. The act of speaking *to* and *with* him gives place to that of speaking *of* him. Derrida emphasizes the 'resistance and excess of de Man to his memory'. The mourning for the friend is not speakable or nameable and hence is not contained in the memory of the living. Deutscher speaks of an encryptment of the other within the self. This encryptment is not the same as what she calls the digestive assimilation of the other in mourning. Here, there is a reference to Abraham and Torok's use of Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia. Here, 'introjection' of normal mourning (that totally interiorizes the dead other so that it is no longer an other) is opposed to 'incorporation' (as a failed mourning where the other 'continues to inhabit me, as a stranger'). Derrida questions this introjection/ incorporation binary. He points at the inevitable remains of the other that constitute the self and changes the issue of mourning to that of an ethics of alterity. Mourning becomes a figure to think the self.

In this notion, introjection of the other is the way in which the other is an assimilated part of the self. The success of mourning is in the act of 'eating' and

'digesting' the other to form the self inalienably in terms of the other. Thus, introjection, which signifies a sort of disintegration of the other into unrecognizable elements appropriated into the self, is also a process that suggests the making of the self in terms of the other. The act of incorporation that maintains the integrity of the other within the self, keeping the other inaccessible in a crypt, is also the process of simple enveloping and not an active engagement with the other. Thus, an active engagement disaggregates the other and a respectful distance does not engage. To quote Derrida:

We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia . . . where faithful interiorization bears the other and constitutes him in me . . . and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other because we grieve for him and bear him *in us* . . . And inversely: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there in his death, outside of us (1989: 167, emphasis original).

Interrogating Aporias

The aporia reached in terms of the two opposing poles of successful and failed interiorization is not enough to access the complications of the various possible situations. One has to be careful enough to remember this predicament. The fetus in the womb is a figure very near to the encrypted other. Its identity has a certain detachment from that of the (m)other who bears it in her womb. Yet, we have just now accounted the ways in which the fetus remains marked by machinations of a patriarchy that constitutes the mother. Parikṣit's predicament of dying and the inability to die both stem from his markings as the sole heir to the Pāṇḍava clan. The encrypted other is not as distant from the 'self' as it seems to be. Yet, the need to think the processes of othering in terms of eating remains. And with it remains the imperative of reducing the implicit violence in the act, the need to 'eat well'. Thinking of the self as ever always a cannibal self, one knows the impossibility and the inevitability of this cannibalism:

The moral question is . . . not, . . . should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but since *one must* eat in any case and since it is and tastes good to eat, and since there's no other definition of good . . . , *how* for goodness' sake should one *eat well* . . . ? (Derrida 1991: 115, emphasis original).

One cannot provide a ready answer to this question. One may only point at the necessity to keep the question alive. And what better text to keep it in the throes of an ethical conundrum than the *itihāsa* also called *Mahābhārata*?

Looking closely into a moment of expansive violence at the end of the Kurukṣetra war, one arrives at the violence constitutive of one's being, the moment of cannibalism that implicates the 'human' self. The carnage of the sleeping Pāṇḍava army and its allies escalates into the possibility of the destruction of the

world at the moment of terror when Aśvatthāmā's *brahmaśira* confronts Arjuna's *brahmāstra*. The terrible moment fizzles out into the momentary death of Parikṣit. The moment is displaced forward into the destruction of the Yādavas as Kṛṣṇa watches ineffectually at the wholesale massacre of his clan. It is a total loss of the valiant maleness of the hero as Arjuna fails to 'protect' the Yādava women from the hands of the 'lowly' marauders. If one then goes back to the moment of terror in the *Sauptikaparvan*, what strikes first is that the incomprehensible terrible moment is produced through a clash of reasons, and not through unreason. Even the emotions of Aśvatthāmā had their own reasonable explanations and their own reasoned itineraries. The moment of terror as an outside to reason had been produced through the dynamics of reason. The resolutions had been marked by the reasons of certain structures of hegemony. The second point that becomes important at this juncture is that the terror produced by *ressentiment* repeats the structure of the rational terror of the dominant. It may even be more coercive and vengeful. Reason and emotion do not form a neat binary of opposed elements. Thirdly, in the given context of the *Mahābhārata*, the workings of reproductive heteronormativity take an interesting turn. The target of *brahmaśira* is deflected from the living Pāṇḍava brothers to the womb, the bearer of the male line of generation. This deflection of the target was also a neutralization. Thus, the threads of heterosexist generational textile had been pliant enough to absorb the shocks of imminent terror. Both the opposing sides in the moment of terror are human. The sublimity of human destruction — the sublime is not always aesthetic — is displaced onto the not-fully-human fetus. Yet, the fetus is also marked by the teleology of being human. The destruction is also displaced, one should not forget, in time and space to a later-day Dvārakā. And finally, the structures of violence, counter-violence and *ressentiments* acting in the production of terror do not absolve the responsibilities of the subject/s who produce or encounter terror. It remains necessary to address the intentions of the subjects who are produced as terrorizing or terror-hounded even when one is aware of the constructions of abstract power relations that operate to produce these subjects. Reading the *Sauptikaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, one may have glimpse of a certain training in the reorganization of desires and imaginations that might, and it may pretty well might not, render one's self a little responsive — if not responsible — to the mundane excesses of a terrorized world.



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